

Honest James  
**Christian Schlegel**

The Song Cave

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Cover: detail of *The Beekeepers and the Birdnester*, by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1568

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FIRST EDITION

*for my family*

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## II

### GOETHE: VARIATIONS

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I

Play, Muse, upon my pain, so that your playing  
nobly causes in my breast to swell another strain  
more adequate to this, my task of marking time.

GOETHE

## Little Ballad

Come gather round me, goodmen ten,  
as dims the pale I've ambled through.  
I store mine eyes in a baking tin  
and shelve it skew.

A wreath is a lay is a chanterelle  
beside a gutted bream and bread;  
come gather round and bid me tell  
that I am dead.

Three coreops from arbor drear  
will suit my grave as soon it's dug.  
Wet them with tears and carry your cares  
in a calfskin rug.

In mine are packed a hundred sighs  
to blow me fast to the house below  
(O children of Reading, would I were wise)  
and down I go.

## Der Zauberberg

One friend asked, haltingly, if my confinement could be halved  
before a taller friend, a banker bred on Schiller, laughed  
and praised the villa's "mineralic views."

They each agreed to sit beside me through the ice of summer  
and the warm December.

It was not news  
when uncle fell again.

My cousin came with papers  
for an August or an April train  
to see the man in Bonn.

Only the moon appeared to set. I lay and did not choose.

## Fable

A melancholic pastor, paraphrasing  
a psalm of David's, cribs from a pantoum he knows:  
"the lining of the cape he shows  
to those assembled dazzles—mendicants . . . an earl . . . a vole,  
and they are changed." The pastor's boy is lazing,  
composing on a lyre:  
"The rain lifts. Shining fire  
will baffle men disposed to retroversion of the soul."

The linen of the cape he shows is dyed  
in pink and sepia, and there are scenes of boys  
asleep, hugging their lyres. This noise  
inside the organ-pipes before they're tuned determines how  
the pipes will sound beneath the note that's tried,  
and strained. The sadness lifts.  
And girls remain in shifts  
who want to change. A hog is eating slop beside a sow.

That is the note. The burgermeister writes  
a line of casuistic doggerel in chalk,  
intended for his wife. They balk  
at making love. An envoy calls and stays past coffee-hour,  
reciting children's verse: long-bearded wights  
dozing among the dead  
and kindred sprites. The red  
imposter has a little book, he says, and reads it in his tower.

## For Ben

1.

What you have risked, I too,  
but haply I, unhaply you.

2.

The magister in Mandalay—short, souverain and saintly—  
will offer each the martinets a Martinican floret, and bouquets of lime.

They are drying and drying faintly, the bouquets of mint and lime.

3.

Vary does the dolor but the laughter pricks forever after,  
loquor, ego loquor, meo voce atque spiritu.

Safe is the malingerer, and dafter. An ailing man is safer.  
Loquor, ego loquor, meo voce atque spiritu.

4.

Do you love me, brother,  
love under the pitch and pother  
the draff of me? Or

are you loving-dust and I a bother,  
a blatherer: knowing you worry there, and begging you hither?

5.

Wroth the rose the light's forsaken,  
light and lighter dart the hares,  
I am by the post you placed, with counting-books about me  
and a jug of beer.

Harried are the drakes, their sleekness  
rare though I expect their sleekness,

near the Dorset briar with my counting-books and beer.

## A Thought of Saint Paul's

I shall bring along sin, saying, "It is my sin,  
of a body and soul, and a part its own."

I shall pray on this brown  
hill as dawn wings in.